

**WORDS, DEEDS, AND THE COMBAT DECISION  
IN OLD ENGLISH HEROIC LITERATURE**

**A Thesis**

**by**

**DAVID W. MATHISEN**

**Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

**MASTER OF ARTS**

**March 2001**

**Major Subject: English Literature**

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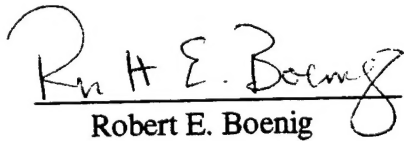
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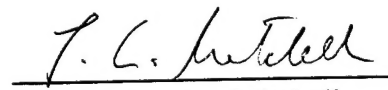
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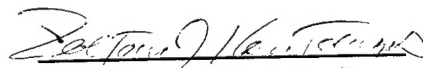
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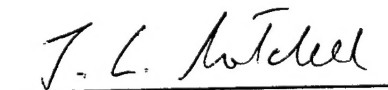
MASTER OF ARTS

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## ABSTRACT

Words, Deeds, and the Combat Decision  
in Old English Heroic Literature. (March 2001)  
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Old English heroic literature frequently deals with the tension surrounding a combat decision, or the decision to enter into avoidable, mortal combat. The combat decision figures prominently in the poems Beowulf, the Battle of Maldon, and in the entry in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle known as "AD 755" or "Cynewulf and Cyneheard." Old English scholars such as Rosemary Woolf and John M. Hill have noted that the tensions in these poems are not resolved by simple reference to a monolithic "Anglo-Saxon Warrior Code" alleged to stretch from the descriptions in the Germania by Tacitus to the end of Anglo-Saxon control of England in 1066. Hill in particular has noted that the *comitatus* relationship between lord and retainer is depicted with often-overlooked differences in remaining Old English texts, particularly concerning the concept of suicidal loyalty to the lord in situations involving a combat decision. Words, Deeds, and the Combat Decision in Old English Heroic Literature examines the motivating factors involved in the combat decision, beginning with a close reading of Tacitus and examining the lord-retainer bond as it impacts the combat decision in different stages of the prevailing concept of loyalty and the understanding of the heroic code. Paying particular attention to oaths and boasting, where words and



deeds are explicitly linked, reveals that the relationship between declaration and action, sign and signification, is critical to the decision to enter into avoidable mortal combat. Close inspection of the form of the heroic boast, and examples in Beowulf and Maldon, suggest that the most significant contributing factor in the combat decision is the individual's concept of personal identity, bound up in the epistemological question of the "weight" of an individual's words and declarations.

For my wife, Elizabeth,

and my sons,

Joshua Warner Mathisen and Elijah John Mathisen.

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I am deeply indebted to Old English scholar, poet, and musician Professor Robert E. Boenig, whose patient guidance, rigorous attention to detail, and uncanny familiarity with the broad sweep of Old English literature and its modern scholarship made this thesis possible. I am also indebted to Professor Larry Mitchell, who taught me Old English in the first place and introduced me to the study of linguistics, and who has graciously brought his appreciation for the English language all the way from Scotland and London to College Station, Texas. I would also like to thank West Point Professor Colonel (Retired) Terry Freeman of the U.S. Army, who introduced me to Beowulf in my first year at the Military Academy, whose mentorship made it possible for me to pursue graduate studies in English literature, and whose teaching inspired me to want to go back to West Point to teach English someday as well.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Two years after the end of the Second World War, a book appeared which took a hard look at the motivation of men engaged in or about to engage in an act of mortal combat. In Men Against Fire, U.S. Colonel S.L.A. Marshall argued that the course of the war had taught the hard lesson that in spite of the staggering advances in technology, "we learned anew that man is supreme, that it is the soldier who fights who wins battles, that fighting means using a weapon, and that it is the heart of man which controls this use" (23). Lamenting the speed with which this lesson was being forgotten in light of the atomic conclusion of that war, Men Against Fire undertook to examine the motivation of individual men in combat and the factors that influenced them either to overcome the "absolutely normal impulse to move away from danger" or succumb to it (148). He concluded with the simple declaration that "personal honor is the one thing valued more than life itself by the majority of men" (149).

Contemporary American literature occasionally provides opportunities to observe the motivational forces which impel a character to enter into mortal combat, in which one participant or the other will die. In The Virginian, Owen Wister allows his hero to reveal to his horrified future wife the motives which compel him to face his mortal enemy in a gunfight rather than flee with her. The novel's protagonist reveals a motivation similar to that asserted by Marshall's Men Against Fire:

If folks came to think I was a coward-- [ . . . ] My friends would be sorry and

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ashamed, and my enemies would walk around saying they had always said so. I could not hold up my head among enemies or friends [. . .]. What men say about my nature is not just merely an outside thing. For the fact that I let 'em keep on sayin' it is a proof I don't value my nature enough to shield it from their slander and give them their punishment. And that's being a poor sort of a jay. (477-478)

Old English heroic literature is replete with examples of this "combat decision," the choice between avoiding and facing voluntary mortal combat. In fact, Old English literature often examines the motivations of warriors just before or even during voluntary life-or-death struggles. Beyond depicting such motives in terms of speeches akin to the speech of the Virginian, there is an even more revealing aspect of some Old English poetry in which the poet actually reveals the thoughts of the combatant as a clue to his reasons for risking or even sacrificing his life. These instances of internal motivation, in which the poet lays aside the typical focus on the description of action broken by occasional speeches, are rare. Because of their rareness, and their potential to open a window onto the values of the pre-Hastings Anglo-Saxon culture, these "self-motivating heroic flashbacks," like rich gems, deserve close scrutiny.

Not surprisingly, the clearest example of this type of "flashback" occurs in Beowulf, which clearly undertakes to examine the ideal of heroic manhood in action. Passages describing crisis moments in the Battle of Maldon also resonate with the self-motivating flashbacks found in Beowulf, as do some of the oath-swearing behavior in other Old Norse, Old High German, and Old Frisian poetry. Because the flashback examples from Beowulf are the most distinct manifestations of this concept, some

questions regarding the controversy surrounding the dating and composition of the poem itself must be examined.

The poetic work called Beowulf after its heroic protagonist survives today in a single manuscript in the British Library in London. The author or authors are unknown, and the dating of the composition of the work is both a subject of intense scholarly dialogue and at the same time a significant factor in theories about the poem's authorship. Scholars generally agree that the date of scribal production of the vellum manuscript itself was between 990 and 1040,<sup>1</sup> well before the Norman Conquest in 1066 catastrophically altered pre-Hastings English civilization. Thus, the poem could not have been composed after that period. After this point of agreement, scholars part company.

Kevin Kiernan of the University of Michigan argues that, within the generally accepted dates for the manuscript itself, a date after the death of King Æthelred Unræd in 1016 is most likely on historical grounds. He notes that after 990, the Viking raids described in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and in the poetic rendition of the Battle of Maldon escalated in violence and effectiveness until 1016, when Cnut the Great became the second Dane in as many years to sit upon the English throne, bringing an end to the struggles that preceded his long and stable reign. Kiernan argues that English scribes would have been unlikely to have any motive for copying a poem that appears to be in any way laudatory toward Vikings (and Danes in particular) until after Cnut became king. He asserts that "if it is hard to conceive of an Anglo-Saxon poet in these centuries [ninth or tenth] who would have composed Beowulf, it is just as hard to conceive of scriptoria throughout these centuries that would repeatedly engage scribes to copy a poem praising the people who were ravaging their country" (21).

Building on this historical argument against a pre-ninth century composition for the poem, Kiernan then mounts a thorough codicological argument that the composition of the poem was contemporary with the well-agreed date bracket of the transcription of the manuscript itself. In fact, he maintains, not only was the composition contemporary with the transcription, but one of the very scribes responsible for the manuscript in our possession was the author (or, more precisely, the synthesizer) of the poem itself. He bases this argument upon several clues in the codex. Evidence includes the precision with which both scribes copied and corrected the words and lines of Beowulf, in contrast to their general inattentiveness to the transcription of the other poems in the manuscript (193-194). Further, the scribes (especially the second scribe) went back and extensively proofread their transcription, correcting spelling and even entire words, in some cases correcting words that were not mis-copied but rather selecting a completely new word as an improvement to the previously inscribed selection. For example, Kiernan cites the replacement in line 19 of folio 182 (Kiernan's foliation)<sup>2</sup>, "where *forgolden* was altered to *forhealden* by adding *h* above the line and by altering *go* to *ea*," although the original *forgolden* was not a copying error and made good sense in the context, as if the actual author were deciding on a slightly-better word than the one that he had originally used (215).

Kiernan has other codicological evidence to support his claim for an eleventh-century composition of the poem by the second scribe of the existing manuscript. One is his interpretation of the frequent corrections by the second scribe of the first scribe's work (274-277), in which the second scribe even corrected words which were not copying errors and generally represent changes in dialectal spelling or to more conservative



spellings. Kiernan interprets these changes as evidence that the second scribe was the agent responsible for blending the events of two existing poetic ideas into the poem we now possess.

He reinforces this conclusion with his interpretation of perhaps the most dramatic codicological evidence in the manuscript, the well-known palimpsest in folio 179 (Kiernan's foliation), in which an entire folio was apparently erased and overwritten. For some reason, during the lifetime of the second scribe, a liquid preparation (possibly a formula composed of cheese, milk, or flour) was applied to the vellum and the words were literally scraped off the leaves (224-227). Then, in the hand of the second scribe but in a hand which has changed significantly, particularly by adopting a more modern version of the letter "a" similar to that which had already been used by the first scribe, new text was overwritten (223). The paleographical evidence suggests that the second scribe, aged by perhaps as much as twenty years, returned to the manuscript and made numerous corrections, including the revision of an entire folio!

In spite of the remarkable support Kiernan found for his theory through his detailed analysis of the Beowulf manuscript itself, there are some strong historical, linguistic, and metrical arguments against his interpretation. The historical assumptions from which Kiernan launched his theory, namely that the poem would have been unlikely to have been written or transmitted during the centuries of Viking depredation need closer examination. Kiernan suggests that the eleventh-century reign of the Danish king Cnut could have inspired a laudatory poem which essentially juxtaposed Cnut with his Scylding ancestors (22-23). The problem with this foundational assumption is that the court of the Scyldings depicted in the Beowulf poem is arguably a dysfunctional court,

and a comparison between Cnut and Hrothgar should really be seen as a rather dubious compliment. Kiernan makes a case that there is little chance for a poem even partially enthusiastic about Scandinavians of any sort being transmitted during the centuries of Viking depredation that preceded the transcription of the existing manuscript. Yet the very durability of the vellum upon which the extant manuscript is written belies this argument, as does Kiernan's assertion elsewhere that the scriptorium responsible for today's manuscript was likely the product of a particular provincial one, with its own fairly primitive and less-aesthetic method of folio arrangement (xxi).

Given the possibility, then, that the manuscript could very well have been copied from an earlier manuscript, one which may have been anywhere from a week to centuries old, there are additional methods of dating which argue for an earlier composition of the poem. Linguistically, Ashley Crandall Amos has argued in Linguistic Means of Determining the Dates of Old English Texts that trends in the metrical alliteration of the palatal versus the velar g, first discussed by Eduard Sievers in 1893, are still valuable for illuminating the question of the dating of Old English meter (100). She cites evidence from Battle of Maldon, Genesis B, Menologium, Judith, Judgment Day II, Battle of Brunanburh, and the Meters of Boethius to argue (with support from earlier linguists and scholars of meter) that there "was clearly a change in the alliterative practice" of poems during the tenth century (101). Somewhere during the beginning to middle of the tenth century, poets cease writing lines that alliterate the velar ("hard") and palatal ("soft") g. Maldon, written close to AD 991, for example, never alliterates the velar and palatal g (101-102). The lines of Beowulf, however, regularly alliterate the two sounds, as do other pre-tenth century poems (101). Although it is theoretically possible that a post-

tenth century poet could create verse which consciously followed an anachronistic pattern, Amos argues that "it is difficult to imagine a late poet depending for functional alliteration on sounds that no longer alliterated in most of his hearers' ears, or to imagine an early poet writing a line like Maldon 192, which would strike most of his hearers as alliterating doubly in the off-verse" (102). Beowulf, with meter that consistently treats the velar and palatal *g* as alliterative, was likely written before the tenth-century shift (and before Maldon), contrary to the Kiernan thesis.

In addition, R. D. Fulk offers additional linguistic and metrical evidence for an eighth- or ninth-century date for the poem, in his History of Old English Meter. He examines at length an observation noted in the 1880s and 1890s by German scholars concerning vowel distinctions that began to disappear from Old English in the eighth and ninth centuries, the significance of which was perceived most clearly by Max Kaluza in 1896 (Fulk, 153). Certain intricate metrical structures are preserved in Beowulf with remarkable consistency which are largely absent from almost all other extant Old English metrical poetry (164-5). The poem preserves these distinctions throughout its length (166), although the vowel distinctions that enable such precise distinctions disappeared south of the Humber by about AD 725, and north of the Humber by about a century later (389).

Based upon his examination of the observation of Kaluza's Law within the meter of Beowulf, Fulk asserts that "Beowulf almost certainly was not composed after ca. 725 if Mercian in origin, or after ca. 825 if Northumbrian" (390). As to the question of whether a later poet could have artificially imitated an earlier metrical style, Fulk argues that the loss of distinctions in certain vowel pronunciations centuries earlier would have

made such an exercise invisible to a reading or listening audience, and virtually impossible for the poet as well. He states that the vowel length distinction "cannot have been preserved phonologically into the latter part of the Anglo-Saxon period, nor readily learned by later poets from older verse, and so Beowulf must derive its linguistic conservatism not from the poet's stylistic choice (or at least not from that alone), but from the fact that it must really be a relatively early poem" (36).

Finally, there is the issue of the types of lord-retainer relationships portrayed in surviving Old English heroic texts. In her important article, "The Ideal of Men Dying with their Lord in the Germania and The Battle of Maldon" (1976), Rosemary Woolf questions some of the unexamined assumptions about the connections between behavior of kings and retainers in the first century account of Tacitus and the late tenth century poem depicting apparently similar behavior. Her findings will be examined in greater detail in Chapter V. However, her basic thesis, that the similarities over a span of nine centuries may be more problematic than is often assumed, is taken up again with important bearing on the question of the dating of Beowulf in a more recent scholarly book written by John M. Hill.

John M. Hill's examination of subtle differences in loyalty-motivations portrayed in pre-Norman texts in The Anglo-Saxon Warrior Ethic: Reconstructing Lordship in Early English Literature locates a political argument based around changes in the mortal-combat motivation. Hill examines closely the decision to face death, either certain death, such as depicted in Maldon, or potential death that could conceivably be avoided, such as depicted in the Finn and Hengest episodes related within Beowulf, the decision of Wiglaf to face the dragon, and the decisions within the famous Parker Chronicle account for AD

755, often titled "Cynewulf and Cyneheard," after the two principal lords in the narrative. Hill finds evidence to argue that the heroic code operating in Beowulf is subtly different than that found in Maldon, and that the code depicted in Maldon is the climax of an emphasis on the supremacy of the lord (and especially the king) originally fostered in literature under Alfred as a reflection of, and support for, his view of the lord-retainer relationship. Hill concludes that Beowulf "stands out as a complex counter to the politically shaped narratives emerging in the ninth century and continuing down virtually to the end of the Anglo-Saxon period" (111). Short of entering the complex dating debate, he does assert generally that "we may assume that Beowulf is not composed new in the very early eleventh century, the period to which the surviving manuscript dates. Also, we might assume that some version of the poem existed perhaps in East Anglian or Mercian contexts before the ninth century -- as many, including most recently Sam Newton (1993) and Peter Clemoes (1995), have argued" (131-132).

The differences that Hill unearths between Beowulf and Maldon in the demonstrated motivation to confront mortal combat or to avoid it are equally interesting even if we lack a precise date for the composition of Beowulf. Whether, as I believe, the poem was composed between the years 800 and 925, or whether we accept the more controversial late bracket of 1016 to 1040, Beowulf as a literary work does indeed point to a slightly different code governing decisions involving voluntary life-or-death combat. Based on the known *terminus ad quem* for Maldon, it may be safe to state that Beowulf reflects the older code, regardless of the actual composition date.

Hill's thesis primarily focuses on the development of the newer, "lord-centered" code, culminating in Maldon. He proposes that the text of Maldon "marks a radical

change in the idea of retainer loyalty as a new match for triumphant lordship, that is, lordship triumphant even in or especially in death" (128). In contrast to the old code, which was "reciprocal and nearly egalitarian" in character, the new code, which Hill traces as incipient in the valuing provided to AD 755, "Cynewulf and Cyneheard," has by the composition of Maldon resulted in "a unilateral idealism that takes one far beyond the ordinary ties of reciprocity" (128).

In this context, the literary instances of the self-motivating heroic flashback, in which an author or poet provides narrative description of the factors influencing the decision to face death in combat otherwise avoidable, become extremely interesting and informative. If Beowulf meditates thoughtfully and broadly on the issue of the combat decision under an older and more egalitarian and reciprocal heroic code, as Hill proposes, then the poem's clear portrayal of moments of self-motivating flashback bear careful consideration. What would motivate a warrior to face avoidable mortal combat prior to the "new code" loyalty to the person of the king?

The answer provided in the heroic flashbacks in Beowulf seems to involve the hero's concept of himself, which is framed in the interplay of words and deeds.

Interestingly enough, the flashback points in the text seem to function almost as mirror images to boasting episodes, and reflect a literary theme of words and deeds operating in the poem at large. In the heroic boast, which is also present in what Hill might call "new code" heroic texts such as Maldon or "Cynewulf and Cyneheard," words are linked to deeds in explicit ways. In the heroic flashback, deeds are linked back to words, often to boast-words, or else "linked forward" to other words, such as "reputation-words."

The prevalence of boast-episodes, and their little-known twin the heroic flashback, in Old English literature of both the "old code" and the "new code," suggests that a rich and very tangible concept of "declaration" is involved in the combat decision. Boasts or oaths were forms of overt declaration, but in Beowulf and elsewhere, silent declarations include the battle gear and appearance of an individual, and even the mere fact of being a lord, a retainer, or a kinsman made a declaration which carried expectations. The examples of combat decisions in old-code and new-code texts provide individuals an opportunity to match their actions to their declarations, or to fail to do so.

Thus, the individual, like the heroic boast or the heroic flashback themselves, becomes an intersection of word and deed. If his action fails to match his declaration--if the signified fails to live up to its sign, so to speak--he becomes like a word severed from meaning or truth, and thus ungrounded, light, false, empty. Those whose actions match their declarations endure, even in death, as do the heroes of Maldon and Beowulf; their actions are grounded, and have weight, and endure (through words) even to this day.

## CHAPTER II

### ASPECTS OF THE ANGLO-SAXON HEROIC CODE

#### IN LITERATURE AND HISTORY

The warrior ethic operating with subtle variations in different Old English texts such as Beowulf, Maldon, or "Cynewulf and Cyneheard" shares many distinctive features with a sort of Germanic or northern warrior ethic first described by Roman historian and orator Publius Cornelius Tacitus (AD 55?-118?). In his Germania,<sup>3</sup> Tacitus called particular attention to details of Germanic society that he found strikingly different than that of his first century audience in the Roman Empire. He describes modes of dress, the place of women, of priests, the methods of law, and of material rewards and punishments, all of which differed greatly from those of Mediterranean culture. In particular, he noted the centrality of wargmaking to the Germanic tribes, of whom he says, "indeed, it seems to them slothful and unmanly to acquire with sweat what one can obtain by blood" (82-83). In Germania, Tacitus records his observations of the culture of the Germanic tribes in northern Europe, providing details still recognizable in literature written by their descendents almost ten centuries later in the Anglo-Saxon culture of England.

The familial connection between the culture of the Germanic tribes of the first century and that of the Anglo-Saxons of pre-Norman England has strong linguistic, historical, and literary documentation. Dorothy Whitelock, in Beginnings of English Society, notes that the "Anglo-Saxons regarded themselves as Germans" and that the "main outlines of English society--apart from those elements introduced later by the adoption of Christianity--are already distinguishable in the account of the German peoples on the Continent, written by Tacitus" (18-19). The migration to the British Isles



by Angles, Saxons, and Jutes from the northern European regions in present-day Denmark and northern Germany (Schleswig-Holstein) has traditionally been dated to AD 449, based on the date given by the Venerable Bede (AD 673-735) in chapter fifteen of his Ecclesiastical History, although modern archaeological finds and consideration of the accounts of earlier writers Gildas and Procopius suggest (possibly temporary) Anglo-Saxon settlements up to a century earlier (Stenton 1, Hunter Blair 15). All the remaining medieval sources agree that the Germanic settlers were invited as mercenaries and given land in exchange for assistance in battles between peoples already on the island of Britain (Hunter Blair 15).<sup>4</sup>

Certainly not a monolithic culture, the "Anglo-Saxon period" of the descendents of those early immigrants, which lasted until the Norman Conquest of 1066, had significant and distinct political, religious, and linguistic differences between time periods and regions. Nevertheless, there are some areas of remarkable harmony between the structures which governed the combat decision under examination, cultural methods of influencing individuals to participate in avoidable violent combat at the risk of their lives and to the death if necessary.

Tacitus provides many details of the types of the Germanic culture's socio-political structures bearing on the combat decision. Chief among these is what he termed the *comitatus*. Tacitus introduces the concept of the *comitatus*, or "body of retainers," in paragraph 13.2 of Germania, saying that "Distinction of birth or great deeds done by their fathers confer on mere lads the rank of chief; the others attach themselves to more mature men whose worth has had prior approval, and they do not blush to be seen among their retainers" (82).<sup>5</sup> This *comitatus* consisted of a body of warriors attached to a leader

(Tacitus calls these leaders variously the *rex* or *principis* or *dux*, with possible distinctions between them).

From his descriptions of the ties of loyalty within these bands, it is clear that they are not absolute, with retainers having some level of "free-agency" or ability to attach themselves to more renowned lords as desired. Some passages from Tacitus' observations which support this conclusion include paragraph 7.2: "Kings they choose for their birth, generals for their valour. But the kings do not have unlimited power without restriction, while the generals lead more by example than command; if they are energetic and seen by all, if they are active in the front ranks, their men look up to them" (80).<sup>6</sup> It is significant that Tacitus says that the king and the general (*rex* and *dux*) are not absolute but are in some vague way chosen (literally, "from good birth and from virtue are"). The rest of the paragraph as well seems to bear this out, emphasizing the voluntariness of the retainers following of both king and war-leader. For instance, Tacitus describes the young warriors of a lord, much like the "free agents" of modern professional sports, changing teams in search of greater fame or monetary compensation: "If their native state grows sluggish from prolonged peace and leisure, many well-born youths actively seek tribes that are then involved in a war, because peacefulness displeases that people and they can win renown more easily in the midst of hazards, while a large retinue is hard to maintain except by violence and war" (83).<sup>7</sup>

In the account by Tacitus, the bond of familial kinship appears to be still equally or more important in terms of combat motivation than that of oath to *rex* or *dux*, a situation that Hill notes will not show signs of change until Alfred's efforts to strengthen

the kingship, documented in accounts such as the Parker Chronicle AD 755. Examples of Tacitus's emphasis on familial loyalty include the following:

An especially strong incitement to courage is the fact that a wedge is formed not by accident or random conglomeration, but through family connections and kinship; and nearby are loved ones, from whom are heard the shrieks of women and the wails of babes. These are each man's most sacred witnesses, these his greatest eulogists; to their mothers and wives they take their wounds, and the women are not afraid to count or examine the blows; they bring to the warriors both food and exhortations. (80)<sup>8</sup>

However, Tacitus also gives details which resonate with aspects of the lord-retainer relationships depicted in Old English texts. These include public gift-giving by the lord as a gesture of reciprocal loyalty to retainers who will or have served him in battle, particularly gifts of war-horses or weapons, and of liberal feasts and banquets: "For the men demand of their leader's liberality their martial steed and their *framea* covered in gore and glory: banquets and a lavish if unpolished pomp serve the men as pay" (83)<sup>9</sup>. Clearly, Tacitus is describing a sort of reciprocal exchange very similar to the kind described in Old English literature. The motivational basis for the loyalty of the warriors Tacitus describes, who would hazard their lives in avoidable combat situations at the bidding of their *rex*, involved a two-way exchange. For their part, the kings gave banquets and war-gear, particularly their war-horse and weapons, to the young warriors of their *comitatus*. In turn, the warriors gave loyalty, service in battle, and their prestige (Tacitus elsewhere states that the kings derive their status from the number and prowess of their retinue) to the king. Again, Tacitus stresses that this reciprocal exchange is not

eternally binding on the retainer; instead, the retainer, especially the young retainer in search of action and greater reward, can throw his sword into the service of other tribes.

In spite of the "free-agent" aspect which is clearly present in Tacitus, the motivating factors arrayed in support of loyalty even unto death to the king one happened to be serving at time of battle were exceedingly powerful. In perhaps the most oft-quoted passage in Germania, Tacitus explains:

When battle has been joined, it is shameful for a leader to be surpassed in valour, shameful for his retinue to lag behind. In addition, infamy and lifelong scandal await the man who outlives his leader by retreating from the battle-line: to defend their chief and guard him, to ascribe to his glory their own brave deeds, is their foremost oath. The leaders fight for victory, the retainers for their leader. (82)<sup>10</sup>

Note the social factors motivating the retainer not merely to participation in avoidable mortal combat, but self-propelled and valorous participation. The primary motivation seems to be negative: shame (*turpe*), infamy (*infame*), and lifelong scandal (*probrosus superstitem*) are the sanctions society affixes to prevent undesirable behavior. In addition to the penalties, Tacitus mentions the positive stimuli in place to guide the retainer toward the correct combat decision in times of extreme stress. These positive sanctions include loyalty to the chief and concern for both his personal safety and for his glory. This concern may indeed be related to the idea of reciprocity (they are solicitous of his glory and safety in return for his demonstrated benevolence toward them), but from Tacitus's text there is another, more immediate, motivation to protect and advance the king's glory and his safety: they have a personal interest in the king's survival. Although the text does not state that if the king dies, all the retainers must also

die in the battle (far from it), it does clearly state that lifelong infamy (strong societal negative sanction) awaits any who outlive the king because they retreated from the battle. This famous passage has important implications for the actions described in the texts of Beowulf, "Cynewulf and Cyneheard," and Maldon, which must be probed in greater depth.<sup>11</sup>

Although historians often use this passage from Tacitus to suggest an unbroken line from the ideals described in the first century to those displayed in the Maldon poem, as John M. Hill points out and as a detailed reading of Beowulf will reveal, there are clear differences in the expectations surrounding the death of one's lord in these two different texts.

An example of the kind of "monolithic Germanic heroic code" reading which focuses on similarities from Tacitus to Maldon is this passage from Peter Hunter Blair's Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England:

In his Germania Tacitus noted the virtues and characteristics which distinguished the members of a chieftain's following or *comitatus* [ . . . ] for the companions it was lifelong infamy to leave the battlefield alive after their chief had fallen. [ . . . ] An incident of later times which is recorded in great detail in the Chronicle provides a perfect example of the same ideals in practice [relates the incident of Parker Chronicle AD 755]. Yet again a century later, to die for one's lord, in battle, even though he himself had fallen already and to fly in disgrace from the battlefield, are represented the poem on the battle of Maldon (991) as the two extremes of noble and evil conduct. (209-210)

This kind of summary, from Tacitus to Maldon, is useful to convey the flavor of Germanic *comitatus* loyalty which indeed is present in such disparate narratives covering a ten-century span. However, a closer examination will reveal important variations in the texture and topography of this code. The most significant variation, in terms of the combat decision in situations of avoidable mortal combat, is the question of battlefield loyalty to the lord. Loyalty to the lord is never absent from the formula; the issue is how that loyalty is to be displayed, particularly in situations in which the lord has been slain. Does loyalty demand the thane fall in battle beside his lord, or does the thane demonstrate greater loyalty by preserving his own life and seeking revenge at a later time and place and under more favorable circumstances?

Hill sees the answer to this question as indicative of the developing importance of the lord and a conscious shift in the reciprocal balance between lord and thane in the direction of the lord engineered by King Alfred and supported by texts arising during and after his reign. Hill defines what he calls the concept of "suicidal loyalty" or "suicidal revenge," in which a follower avenges the slaying of his lord immediately upon the slayers, under circumstances which will result in the retainer's death beside his lord. The model expression of such suicidal violence occurs, of course, in Maldon.

However, unlike the "monolithic" model which sees the suicidal gesture in Maldon as a reflection in the late tenth century of an ideal that remained unchanged since Tacitus, Hill notes that "In Old English poetry, except for The Battle of Maldon, we find no expressions of suicidal revenge. Even the famous retainer loyalty expressed in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle concerning war between Cyneheard and Cynewulf (entry for 775)--and discussed in chapter 3--is not framed as loyalty reasserted within a context of

certain death" (112). Indeed, "Beowulf contains no suicidal code of battlefield loyalty--no automatic code at all" (132).

As Hill demonstrates, citing examples from the text, Beowulf clearly features revenge as a key theme that runs throughout the poem, including the sub-episodes about Finn, Hildeburh, Hengest, the Heathobeards, and Onela and his nephews (47). But in Beowulf, even when it concerns the hero himself, "revenge is taken and honor nobly conserved or even enhanced without suicidal effort" (113). Beowulf, for example, "actually leaves the battlefield on which Hygelac, his lord and uncle, lies dead [2354-2372]. Later still he bides his time before avenging another king and kinsman's death [Heardred, son of Hygelac, slain by Onela], as does the Dane Hengest in the poem's Finnsburg episode" (113-114).

In the above revenge episodes, Beowulf ultimately exacts revenge, but not immediately on the same battlefield by slaying as many of his lord's slayers in "suicidal revenge." Yet, in each case, Beowulf is not subject, in the words of Tacitus, to "infamy and lifelong scandal" which "await the man who outlives his leader." On the contrary, when Beowulf, the sole survivor, returns to the shores of the Geats after Hygelac's death, the poet tells us that *þær him Hygd gebead hord ond rice* (2369): "there, Hygd [the widow of Hygelac] offered him hoard and kingdom" (Rebsamen 76).

The solution to this apparent contradiction may lie in the text of Tacitus itself. As noted before, the Roman historian does not indicate that shame and infamy awaited any retainer who outlived his leader, but rather any retainer who outlived his leader "by retreating from the battle-line" (*ex acie recessisse*). If we, as Old English scholars familiar with the text of Maldon, anachronistically superimpose the choice faced by the

retainers of Bryhtnoth onto the text of Tacitus, we may well see Maldon as an example of what we (mistakenly) think Tacitus is saying -- namely, that none may outlive his lord, period, without shame and infamy, since the rhetoric in Maldon indeed raises the old code to new "heights" to say exactly that. However, the presence of numerous episodes in Beowulf suggesting that revenge need not be immediate and suicidal, as well as Hill's further arguments that later poetry reflects a new lord-heavy balance in the reciprocal relationship between lord and thane (which would find its ultimate expression in Maldon) argue that the suicidal loyalty demonstrated in Maldon is by no means the only possible interpretation of Tacitus's oft-quoted paragraph.



## CHAPTER III

## THE IMPORTANCE OF HEROIC BOASTS AND OATHS

One other important positive stimulus in the famous passage from Tacitus about the king and his retainers' loyalty deserves greater examination in light of its resonance with later Old English texts. Tacitus describes the desire of the warriors to ascribe glory to their king, in fact to give their king the glory for any of their valorous actions on the battlefield. This desire, he says, "is their foremost oath" (*praecipuum sacramentum est*). Dorothy Whitelock observes that the transfer of deeds to the leader resurfaces in Beowulf: "King Hygelac in Beowulf is called 'the slayer of Ongentheow,' although the deed was done by two of his thanes" and "Beowulf gave to King Hygelac the gifts he had been given for his services in Denmark" (30). The passages from the text to which Whitelock refers here are line 1968a, in which Beowulf is called *bonan Ongenþeoes* ("the bane of Ongentheow"), and 2152-2154a:

Het ða in beran    eafor heafodsegn  
 heaðosteapne helm,    hare byrnan,  
 guðsweord geatolic,

which Rebsamen renders, "He bore to his guardian    the golden boar-banner / bright-burnished helmet    hand-linked mailcoat / gold-handled sword" (69).

The fact that Tacitus describes this convention as "their foremost oath" suggests the probability that he was literally describing an oath of loyalty and intent to win honor for the lord, formally sworn by the retainer. Certainly, such oaths figure prominently in later Old English heroic literature, including Beowulf and Battle of Maldon, and in other Germanic heroic literature, such as the Old High German Hildebrandeslied and, as Thomas D. Hill has observed, in an Old Frisian text entitled the Fia-eth (170).

Oaths figure prominently in the combat decision. Dorothy Whitelock notes that in 666, "Bishop Wilfred's retinue swore to fight to the death, if need be, against a vastly superior force of heathen South Saxons" (32), an early recorded instance of oath-swearing relating to mortal combat and one which will be seen again over three centuries later in the Maldon poem.

The oath of allegiance between a retainer and a lord had certain characteristic components during Anglo-Saxon society. As Alain Renoir notes in "The Heroic Oath in Beowulf, the Chanson de Roland, and the Nibelungenlied," "the heroic oath was by no means one-sided," but rather a reciprocal action with requirements for the lord as well as the retainer (238). Renoir points out that the lord's requirements included protection (he notes that the lord is frequently called the *helm*), and we have already seen indications from Tacitus that the lord was expected to provide weapons and steeds. Old English poetry, such as Beowulf and the lamentation-poem Wanderer, depict the lord as the provider of arm-bands or rings, gifts, and hall-banquets, which combined the provision of food, shelter from the dark and the elements, camaraderie, and social status.

But, what did the retainer's oath to the lord entail? Certainly military service to the lord was part of the oath of allegiance. Whitelock provides this oath of service to a lord from Christian times, sworn over relics:

By the Lord, before whom these relics are holy, I will be loyal and true to N, and love all that he loves, and hate all that he hates, (however) in accordance with God's rights and secular obligations; and never, willingly and intentionally, in word or deed, do anything that is hateful to him; on condition that he keep me as I

shall deserve, and carry out all that was our agreement, when I subjected myself to him and chose his favour. (33)

In this oath, the obligations of the lord are clearly included as a condition of service, far different from the absolute devotion and the "divine right" concept that would later become familiar in post-Hastings feudalism. The lord must "keep me as I shall deserve, and carry out all that was our agreement." Noticeably absent, moreover, is any stipulation of what we might recognize as an explicit statement of what John M. Hill called the "suicidal code of battlefield loyalty" (132), in other words, a stipulation that in the event of the lord's violent death, the retainer would stay and die by his side. Far from being a strange absence, the absence of such a clause is in keeping with the reciprocal nature and "free-agent" character of Anglo-Saxon *comitatus* culture. If Hill is correct, then the "unwritten" (or implicit, rather than explicitly stated or sworn) requirement for suicidal loyalty, such as that demonstrated at Maldon according to the poem, was consciously added to the "warrior code" during and after Alfred.

However, there certainly existed in Anglo-Saxon heroic culture, prior to the "pro-suicide" shift in the warrior ethic proposed by Hill, a mechanism which foreshadows the rise of the suicidal ethic and probably formed the seed for its later development. This mechanism is the heroic boast. By "boast," I am referring to a spontaneous episode, depicted at least seven times in extant Old English and linguistically-related literature, in which a hero formally and publicly pledges himself to specific action (Tyler finds seven: five in Beowulf, including five by Beowulf and one by Wiglaf, plus one in Waldere B and one in the Old High German Hildebrandslied) (551). I wish to distinguish this

important heroic activity from the different activity of pledging allegiance to a lord, which I will call the retainer's "oath."

It is very useful to distinguish the boast from the oath, although they share many structural features and although medieval scholars do not always distinguish the terms in the way I am proposing (Renoir and Lee Edgar Tyler, for example, regularly refer to boasting incidents as "oath" incidents or term them "the heroic oath"). The dissimilarities are more instructive than the similarities. All retainers, presumably, would be expected to swear allegiance to a lord, else they would not be a retainer to begin with. But not all retainers are depicted as participating in boasting behavior. An oath, as I am defining it, appeared to be a long-term and general obligation, pledging allegiance until such allegiance were terminated. But a boast is a pledge for a specific action, such as Beowulf's pledge to kill Grendel. Unlike the oath of allegiance cited by Whitelock, heroic boasts in Beowulf frequently make use of language stating in effect, "I will fulfill this boast or I will suffer mortal (graphically-described) consequences." Finally, consistent with the evolution of the heroic code proposed by John M. Hill, the boast is the act of a "free-agent": it is voluntary, it is spontaneous, it is initiated entirely by the retainer. In short, boasting appears to be the mechanism that obligated a warrior to suicidal action during the era of what we might call the "strong" retainer, prior to the ascendancy of kingship, which engulfed the older "strong" retainer and dwarfed him under the new "strong" lord.

These sorts of distinctions, in fact, appear to be entirely warranted by the Old English language itself. As we might expect, the Old English texts that have survived reveal a wealth of terms covering many types of boasting action, with what are clearly

subtle shades of meaning. For example, words that appear to indicate long-term obligation, oath of allegiance, or covenant include the nouns *fæstnung*, *trēow*, *(ge)trēowþ*, *frumspræc*, *trīwa*, *word*, and *wedd*,<sup>12</sup> and the verbs *(ge)trēowsian* and *getrymman* (Roberts and Kay 1: 574).

Different in meaning, but also rich in Old English variants, are the words for a declaration of purpose for a specific situation, what I will categorize under the broad word "boast" (because associated with Old English *beot*), or vow to action, promise. These Old English words include the nouns *(ge)bēot*, *(ge)hāt*, *word(ge)bēot*, *behæð*, *feohgehāt*, *behāt*, and *foregehāt*; and the verbs *andettan*, *behātan*, *gehātan*, *(ge)bēotian*, *āpswerian*, *āswerian*, and *(ge)swerian* (Roberts and Kay 1: 574-575).

Note that the predecessor of the modern English "oath," the Old English word *āþ* falls into this general category of "boasts," which is no doubt why both Renoir and Tyler select it when discussing the "heroic oath." If it had retained its "boast" shading into modern English, then we would probably have to distinguish between these large groups by calling the long-term compact a "trow" and the specific-action vow a "boast/oath." However, speakers of modern English are generally familiar with "oath" as a long-term, general obligation, used for such phrases as "oath of office," "oath of enlistment," and "oath of allegiance." Thus I am using it as the modern English descriptor for loyalty-swearing as opposed to boasting. The Old English appears to have had a particularly rich category of *āþas*, for many intriguing occasions. Compare, for instance, "Oath-swearing" (*āpswerung*, *āpswyrð*), "A preliminary oath" (*foreāþ*), "An oath of exculpation" (*ānfeald āþ*), "A threefold oath" (*þrīfeald āþ*), "An oath taken by a group" (*ungecoren āþ*) "Supporters of an oath" (*āþfultum*), and "An oath of reconciliation" (*uncēas(t)es āþ*)

(Roberts and Kay 1: 624). With such obvious distinctions within a single word-family, based on the different occasions and situations for such activity, the more general distinction between oaths of retainership or allegiance, and boasts of specific martial activity for a precise situation, seems entirely warranted.

As we have seen, the "oath of allegiance" to the lord that would be sworn by the retainer did not necessarily include an understanding of suicidal loyalty. Thus, prior to the growing dominance of the lord and the development of a more suicidal code that Hill asserts was specifically fostered by Alfred, the motivation for the retainer to face avoidable mortal combat came from more sources than a monolithic responsibility to the lord. It is with this understanding that we can better appreciate the importance of the boast.

Lee Edgar Tyler notes that each of the seven boasts found in extant Old Germanic heroic poetry texts follows a recognizable pattern. The seven extant heroic boasts, of which four belong to the character of Beowulf, include five in Beowulf (counting one by Wiglaf in the dragon fight), one in the fragment of Waldere B, and one in the Old High German Hildebrandslied (Tyler 551). Tyler observes,

An examination of the seven oaths will demonstrate that each adheres to the following three-part structure:

- |                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| I. Formulaic Introduction      | In which the speaker is identified (usually by patronymic) and the speech-act is identified as a heroic oath.  |
| II. Iteration of Circumstances | Wherein the hero states in very specific terms the conditions under which the imminent combat will take place. |

## III. Referral

By which the hero refers the  
outcome of the imminent combat to a  
personified preternatural arbitrator  
(OE *deað*, *wyrd*, *hild*; OHG *reht*).  
(559)

Tyler goes on to note that, although Beowulf has the majority of the remaining examples of the heroic boast, the presence of parallel oath in Waldere and Hildebrand "deserve special consideration, since the diversity of their texts supports the conclusion that we are examining a truly traditional and extremely widespread method of composition; and the remarkable similarity of these two oaths to those of the Beowulf manuscript further suggests that we are examining *bona fide* multiforms of a theme" (560).

Since all the other boast-episodes have an even more clearly-pronounced pattern of Tyler's three elements, an examination of this first, anomalous boast will demonstrate Tyler's pattern as "the exception that proves the rule." In lines 631-638, we encounter the first of the four heroic boasts in Beowulf:

Beowulf maðelode, bearn Ecgðeowes:  
"Ic ðæt hogode ða ic on holm gestah  
sæbat gesæt mid minra secga gedriht  
ðæt ic anunga eowra leoda  
willan geworhte oðpe on wæl crunge  
feondgrapum fæst. Ic gefremman sceal  
eorlic ellen oðpe endedeg  
on ðisse meoduhealle minne gebidan!"

Frederick Rebsamen's verse translation reads:

Beowulf spoke son of Ecgtheow  
"I swore to myself when I sailed from home  
mounted my ship with my men around me  
that I alone would ease your heartgrief  
settle this feud here or fall deathwards  
in Grendel's grasp. I'll give you his lifeblood  
deliver his fiend-soul or finish my days

here in Heorot high treasure-hall." (21)

Note the aspects of Tyler's three-part structure, apparent here even in a relatively short boast.<sup>13</sup> Tyler's first element, quoted above, is that the speaker be introduced, often using a patronymic (the name of his father or ancestors), and the speech identified as a boast (559). In this case, the text begins the boast with the familiar pattern, *Beowulf maðelode, bearn Ecgðeowes*, using the patronymic as noted in Tyler's pattern. Tyler explains, "as we shall see in examining the other six oaths, such a formulaic introduction is a characteristic of the oath, and will appear (as it does in three of the seven oaths) even if the oath should occur as part of an ongoing speech" (563). Tyler also notes that the speech is "further identified as a *beot* by the term *gilpcwide Geates*" in the lines immediately following Beowulf's words, in which we read:

Ðam wife ða word wel licoden  
gilpcwide Geates eode goldhroden  
freolicu folccwen to hire frean sittan. (639-641)

Rebsamen's translation takes some license, although capturing the sense:

His words were welcome to Wealhtheow's heart  
that bountiful boast-- then back with her lord  
that proud folk-queen found her station. (21)

A more literal translation would be:

The woman liked this word well,  
the boast-speech of the Geat; [she] went, gold-adorned,  
the noble folk-queen, to sit down with her lord.

In line 639, "The woman liked this word well," the text uses *word*, which Roberts and Kay have found to be a synonym for "promise, oath" in more than one text (574). This term, in addition to *gilpcwide* further identifies Beowulf's speech as a typical, pattern-following, *beot*.



The second element Tyler identifies in the heroic boast is the "Iteration of Circumstances, wherein the hero states in very specific terms the conditions under which the imminent combat will take place" (559). Tyler identifies this portion of this boast:

The Iteration of Circumstances (632-638) in Beowulf's oath in the hall takes the form of a statement of intent, and falls naturally into two parts: lines 632-36a make clear that it is Beowulf's resolve to "work the will" (*willan geworhte*, 635a) of Wealhðeow's people or to die in the attempt, while lines 636b-38 constitute a statement of the consequences of Beowulf's failure to do so, consequences of which he is obviously acutely aware. (563)

During the "iteration" phase, the hero outlines the action to which his words bind him, and reinforces them with dire, self-imposed sanctions ("or to die in the attempt," as Tyler paraphrases above). The theme of "do or die," in other words, successful completion of the boast or self-imposed sanction of death, Tyler finds in other Old Germanic poems, including the Old High German Hildebrandslied. He says of this portion of Beowulf's boast,

These lines represent the occurrence of a motif I have found to be common in Old Germanic heroic poetry, one that I call the *oðer twega*, a term derived from Hildegýð's exhortation to Waldere in the Waldere A fragment, the first text in which I noticed its importance. In her exhortation, Hildegýð encourages Waldere by reciting the prowess of the sword Mimming and urging him not to allow his valor to fail. Then she reminds him:

is se daeg cumen  
 ðæt ðu scealt aninga oðer twega  
 lif forleosan, oððe langne dom  
 agan mid eldum, Ælfheres sunu! (8b-11)

[The day has come that you must presently do *one of two things*:

lose your life, or gain eternal fame among men, son of Ælfhere!] (Tyler 563)

Elaborating on this "one of two things motif," Tyler says that "the moment Beowulf utters the word *oðþe* (637b) in Heorot, his speech resounds with all the force the tradition can bestow upon it. There can be no question that the combat will take place, or whether it will end in death. By committing this speech-act in Heorot, Beowulf is effectively condemning either Grendel or himself" (564).

This *oðer twega* motif explains Beowulf's propensity, more fully developed in other boasting episodes, for elaborating his own death (should he fail to accomplish the boast) in extremely graphic and gory detail. As Tyler has noted, the "iteration" phase of the boast is the place for declaring what will happen, and imposing a self-proclaimed death sentence. In his earlier speech of initial greeting to Hrothgar, which Tyler does not treat as a boast or even mention in his article except in a footnote, but which contains all three of the elements, Beowulf has declared his intention to kill Grendel, and sealed his vow with some of the most memorable images in the entire text:

"ac ic midgrape sceal  
feond wið feonde    ond ymb feorh sacan  
lað wið laðum    ðær gelyfan sceal  
Dryhtnes dome    se ðe hine deað nimeð,  
Wen' ic ðæt he wille    gif he wealdan mot,  
in ðæm guðsele    Geotena leode  
etan unforhte    swa he ofte dyde,  
mægen Hreðmanna.    Na ðu minne ðearfte  
hafalan hydan    ac he me habban wile  
dreore-fahne    gif mec deað nimeð  
byreð blodig wæl    byrgean ðenceð,  
eteð angenga    unmurnlice  
mearcað morhupu.    no ðu ymb mines ne ðearft  
lices feorme    leng sorgian." (438b-451)

("with my handgrip only  
 I will fight this fiend find his life-core  
 man against monster. Tomorrow you will find  
 at rising of light the Ruler's judgment.  
 If this demon wins no doubt he will banquet  
 on bodies of Geats gorge with all of us  
 swill and swallow snatch our lives away  
 munch on our bones. Do not mourn for me  
 or search for my head in shadows of defeat  
 if he cracks my bones and bends me deathwards  
 hauls me away hoping to taste me  
 slash me to morsels with murder in his heart  
 staining the moors. Do not sorrow for long  
 for my lifeless body lost and devoured.") (Rebsamen 15).

In short, the second element of the heroic boast includes a solemn proclamation of intention to enter into voluntary mortal combat, shored up by a self-imposed ultimatum (or "*oðer twega* motif"), "victory or death!"

Tyler asserts that the heroic boast under examination, unlike all other extant textual heroic boasts, does not contain the characteristic third element, which he calls "Referral," or, the portion "by which the hero refers the outcome of the imminent combat to a personified preternatural arbitrator (OE *deað*, *wyrd*, *hild*; OHG *reht*)" (559). As we have just seen in the "Hail to Hrothgar" speech, which Tyler does not treat as a boast, presumably because it does not occur immediately prior to combat, Beowulf referred the outcome of his impending fight with Grendel to *Dryhtnes dome* ("The Lord's Judgment"), and he ends this entire boast speech with the formula "*Gæð a wyrd swa hio scel!*" ("Fate goes as it must!") (455b). And, in later boasts which Tyler does examine, "Beowulf's referral of the combat's outcome to *witig God . . . halig Dryhten* (the wise God . . . the holy Lord) is also significant" (566). In other words, this sort of referral to supernatural agents for the determination of the "choice between two" offered in the heroic ultimatum defines the third element of the heroic boast.

From the foregoing in-depth analysis of the heroic boast, we can better examine the important themes that such a pattern introduces. As Tyler asserts, the boast is found in more heroic Old Germanic literature than Beowulf alone, although Beowulf clearly provides the most numerous examples of this convention. The heroic boast was clearly a well-defined motif, with three recognizable elements present in six of the seven remaining examples, and two of the three elements in the other.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE COMBAT DECISION IN THE OLD HEROIC CODE

We have already seen that John M. Hill suggests that in what I call the "old code" (pre-Alfred), the nature of the thane-retainer bond was more "reciprocal and nearly egalitarian" (128) than in the later phase of Anglo-Saxon retainership. I suggest that the fact that Beowulf provides us with by far the most numerous treatments of the heroic boast is not coincidental, and is tied logically to Hill's assertion. Hill has noted that, in terms of the heroic code displayed in extant Old English heroic poetry, "we have Beowulf and then we have all the rest" (132).

A clear example of the difference between the kind of code operant in Beowulf as opposed to the one later seen in Maldon is the situation in which Wiglaf must rally Beowulf's bodyguard during the dragon-battle. Hill notes that this situation is closest to the types of situations later found in the texts of "Cynewulf and Cyneheard," or in the Battle of Maldon (132). Unlike most of the fights in Beowulf, which involve single combat, in the dragon-fight there is a clear need for intervention by retainers, giving us an opportunity to see the lord-thane dynamic in action. By contrast, texts such as "Cynewulf and Cyneheard" and Maldon are intensely interested in demonstrating the lord-thane dynamic in action, and examine it from several angles.

In the final fight of Beowulf, Wiglaf perceives that Beowulf, the famous single-combat king, is in danger. The dragon has belched fire at Beowulf, and the hero is surrounded by a circle of flames left burning on the ground around him, after narrowly

surviving the blast himself. In lines 2650b-2656a, Wiglaf appeals to the warriors (sworn to loyalty to their king), to enter battle:

God wat on mec,  
 ðæt me is micle leofre,    ðæt minne lichaman  
 mid minne goldgyfan    gled fæðmie.  
 Ne ðynceð me gerysne    ðæt we rondas beren  
 efte to earde,    nemne we æror mægen  
 fane gefyllan,    feorh ealgian  
 Wedra ðeodnes.

(God knows in me  
 I'm ready for fire    to feed on my body  
 cinder me with flames    beside my goldgiver.  
 It's a poor showing    if we pack our shields  
 haul them back now    no help to our leader - -  
 we should fell this monster    fight beside our lord  
 our flame-wounded king). (Rebsamen 85)

As Hill reads this speech, "Wiglaf's assistance is far from a dramatization of automatic response" (132). There is clearly a correct decision, in the eyes of the poet and audience, which the thanes fail to make, but the rhetoric Wiglaf chooses makes clear that he is pleading, not demanding. "The affair here," Hill says, "is presented as still ongoing and thus open-ended" (132). Wiglaf appeals to their memory of the "honorable and worth-conferring things Beowulf has done" for his retainers, Hill notes, which supports his assertion that the situation is thus cast by the text "as a reciprocal one" (133).

In the absence of an automatic, suicidal code of retainership, the heroic boast takes on much greater importance. No wonder it is so much more evident in the "old code" text of *Beowulf* than in the numerous texts Alfred fostered in his role as not only the patron of the "new code" but of letters. Although I do not suggest that Alfred's regime actively destroyed "old code" texts, it may be fruitful to speculate on at least the possibility that the emphasis on newer values contributed to a lack of scribal demand for

icons of the older, out-of-vogue model, and contributed to the paltry textual posterity of a poem such as Beowulf.

Whatever its impact on the textual history of poetry, the combination of the lack of suicidal loyalty-code and emphasis on the importance of heroic boasting evident in the text of Beowulf points to fruitful lessons on the subject of the combat decision, that question of motivation to engage in avoidable mortal combat. Furthermore, the conclusions suggested by this combination of lack and emphasis have great resonance with oft-noted themes and clearly-recognizable themes in the poem, a fact which adds to our confidence in the validity of such findings.

The structure of the boast, which we have examined at some length, seems to demonstrate that the speaker's concept of himself is intimately involved in the intersection of word and deed there represented. As Tyler demonstrates, the boast always begins with a declaration of the speaker's identity, adding gravity by the addition of the name of the father as well. This fact is the first clue that the boast involves the question of identity, specifically, the speaker laying his identity on the line. His words are reinforced by his identity at that time, reinforced indeed by the reputation of the father mentioned as well, whether the father is alive or dead at the time of the boast. Thus, in one sense, the opening identification with patronymic acts as a guarantee of action, saying in effect, "All who hear can be assured that the actions which I will now promise to accomplish will be done in deed, because all that I am and have ever accomplished, and all that my father ever accomplished guarantees that what I now say will be."

Beyond the value of the name or names as a guarantee or reassurance, their mention also brings into play a notion of liability. In other words, by laying his name and even his father's name on the table, the hero places them in jeopardy until the action is accomplished. In addition to the admittedly expansive paraphrase of reassurance given above, the hero is also declaring, "I am not just laying my reputation and my father's reputation down to show that I can do, that I am able to do, what I am about to declare, but I am also laying my reputation and, by extension my father's, on the line by so declaring. I understand that I stand to lose fame, reputation, *mærða*, and personal honor if I do not accomplish what I am about to declare to you."

Any doubts that the hero is saying something similar to the foregoing should be diminished by the fact that, in the second portion of the boast formula, he explicitly declares just such an "either / or" ultimatum in terms of his own physical life. In each of the pre-battle boasts in *Beowulf*, including Wiglaf's, the speaker describes his death, sometimes in graphic detail. This fact again leads us to the conclusion that the boast has to do with the speaker's self-conception. In each case, whether in many words or in few, he says, "If I do not match words with corresponding deeds, may I actually cease to exist."

Tyler's essay suggests that the *oðer twega* virtually guarantees that the words will lead to combat and the death of one or the other combatants (564). Expanding somewhat on Tyler's concept, we can see in a literary or linguistic sense that the words themselves support Tyler's assertion. It is a choice of "either of twain," to use the closest modern English derivatives. In other words, there are only two alternatives admitted, there will be no third option. The hero is effectively stating, to take again the liberty of expanding



on the implied messages latent in his speech: "I have declared my intention to enter into mortal combat. Here are the two things that may now happen: he will die, or I will die. That makes two options. Two, and only two. There will be no third option, such as, that I will have made this boast and then I will fail to enter into combat, leaving the result that both of us will live. That is not one of the two options. That would be a third option. I have said there will be only two options." What is going on, if we unpack the implications of the specifically required terms of the heroic boast, is a powerful linking of word and deed, an almost magical denial of the option that word might be matched by no deed, a prohibition against "sign" not being paired with expected "signification". "That shall not be," the hero says. "There are only two options here, and falsehood, in which word and deed do not match, may not be one of them."

The power of this type of boast as an actual motivator for action is revealed in a little-remarked feature of Beowulf. That feature is the effect of these words on not just other characters in the text (which is noted regularly), but upon the speaker himself. In his essay, "Heroic Role Models: Beowulf and Others," Edward B. Irving asserts that it is very difficult to speculate with confidence concerning the effect of heroic poetry upon a bygone Anglo-Saxon audience (347). Instead, he proposes "a more cautious route: investigating what we can perceive of the effect of role-models *inside* the confines of the poems, an effect less conjectural than our imaginative reconstruction of vanished audiences, since it is an effect still visible in the text" (348). Thus, he proposes that, if we wish to see how the deeds performed by Beowulf might have affected an observer from a far-distant culture, the many details of which still elude us, we would be well advised to look at the reaction of Wiglaf. Applying this to the heroic boast, we can observe the

reaction of Wealtheow, Hrothgar, and the gathered retainers at the warriors' banquet of Heorot after Beowulf utters his speeches. But even more important than these textually-preserved reactions of other characters is the effect on another character strangely overlooked: Beowulf himself.

The power of the word-deed bond forged in the heroic boast is nowhere more evident than in its actual effect on the hero himself. Very rarely does the poem actually narrate what Beowulf is thinking at any time. The focus of the poem is on action, occasionally broken by narrative description, or by speeches. There are only a few moments in which the narrative describes passing thoughts. Significantly, one of these rare instances of narrated thought depicts Beowulf remembering his *gilpcwide*, spurring him to heroic action.

During his first fight, against Grendel, after the two opponents have locked hand-grasps, the poem suddenly illuminates the thoughts of the hero:

Gemunde ða se goda    mæg Higelaces  
 æfenspræce    uplang astod  
 ond him fæst wiþfang    fingras burston  
 eotun wæs utweard    eorl furður stop. (758-761)

My literal translation:

Then the good one,    the kinsman of Hygelac,  
 remembered evening-speech.    He stood up  
 and, firm, grasped him.    Fingers burst.  
 the giant was retreating away.    The warrior went after him.

In the midst of a violent and action-packed struggle with Grendel, what runs through Beowulf's mind? The *æfenspræce* ("evening-speech") he made the night before!

Here we see, as in the boast, a true unity of words and action. In the boast, the hero makes every effort to guarantee that his words will be linked with action. He binds

his words to action by pledging his fame and reputation, his name and his father's name, his body, his life, his very existence. He admits only two possibilities, both of them tied to the assumption that the promised action will at least take place. Now, in the self-motivating heroic flashback, all claims for the powerful, identity-invested nature of the heroic boast are vindicated. The single thought given to the hero by the text, in the midst of action, is of his word. He declared an outcome, and he focuses on his declaration. Who he is, placed publicly on the table of the meadhall the night before, is bound up in that action. This investment of his very identity, the text implies, is the most powerful motivating factor at the moment of crisis. Incidentally, it is the same motivating factor that S.L.A. Marshall, based on hundreds of rigorous personal interviews, declared in 1947 to have been the determining factor motivating the individual combatants that participated in a different desperate struggle in northern and western Europe. Although not engaged in heroic boasting, the soldiers afterward identified their primary motivation to have been a keen regard for their repute with the other men in their immediate outfit; we might even say, regard for *mærða*.

I have earlier asserted that the speaker of the heroic boast, by nature of the public nature of the boast and by certain ubiquitous features of each surviving boast, declared implicitly that his fame, reputation, or Old English *mærða* was at stake in the fulfillment of the action promised. In the other moments at which the text reveals Beowulf's actual thoughts during battle, this *mærða* is prominent.

During the combat with the mother of Grendel, after Unferth's sword has failed to live up to its reputation of battle-victory, the hero reaches a point of crisis. We are told that he *eft wæs anræd,    nalas elnes læt, / mærpā gemyndig,    mæg Hylaces* ("Then he

was resolved, not at all letting go of his valor, / remembering his reputation, the kinsman of Hygelac") (1529-1530). After this turning point, spurred by the thought of his *mærþa*, Beowulf grapples Grendel's mother to the cave-floor and ultimately slays her. Similarly, after his first confrontation with the dragon, he is beaten back and must stagger, the text describing the smoke coming out of his faceplate, and Beowulf thinks again of his personal fame, *mærþa*. It is his reputation, the words that his deeds will engender, his "glory." In short, it is his identity, it defines who he is. We see for the third time the power of this internal need: *ða gen guþcýning, / mæþa gemunde, mægenstrengo sloh / hildebille, þæt hyt on heafolan stod, / nyðe genyded* ("Then the battle-king, / remembered his reputation, with great-strength struck / with his battle-blade, so that it stuck into the head, / violently forced") (2678b-2680a). These three flashbacks are corollaries to the approval-scenes that followed Beowulf's heroic boasts. After he pledged to conquer or die, the rulers and warriors in Heorot responded as if he had already done something in action. During the action itself, Beowulf's mind goes each time to words, either those he has declared or those which will be afterwards declared about him.

Thus, fulfillment of the boast in a way defines the exemplary hero. He is clearly concerned enough with fulfilling that boast to look back to it during the battle, and to draw strength from the urgent need to carry out his spoken words. In a very real way, the measure of a man in the old-code economy can be said to be related, not simply to whether he accomplishes some objective quota of exemplary deeds, but whether he makes good on his promises or declarations. Seeing the importance of the connection between a promise and its fulfillment in terms of the heroic boast opens the door to the

thematic and metaphorical applications of the same concept to almost every important aspect of a person's life. The prevalence of this theme in Beowulf suggests that the man placing himself under the severe contractual economy of the boast is not entering a realm different in kind from his day-to-day existence, but only a realm different in degree. In other words, the text of Beowulf demonstrates that a man was entering into a sort of quotidian version of the boast with every action, statement, or even non-verbal statement that he made, all the time. Focusing our gaze, as it were, on the link between word and deed manifest in the extreme case of the boast, or the deed to word link manifest in the heroic flashback, allows us to see applications of this same concept virtually everywhere else we look within the text.

In the first confrontation between the Danish shore-guardian and Beowulf's war-group upon the hero's arrival on the shores of Hrothgar's territory, the theme of declaration and fulfillment surfaces. Seeing the Geats disembarking in their war-gear, the thane of Hrothgar accosts the intruders to learn their purpose on Danish shores:

'Hwæt syndon ge    searohæbbendra  
byrnum werede    ðe ðus brontne ceol  
ofer lagustræte    lædon cwomon  
hider ofer holmas?    Hwæt ic hwile wæs  
endsæta,    ægwearde heolde,  
ðe on land Dena    laðra nænig  
mid scipherge    sceððan ne meahte.  
No her cuðlicor    cumon ongunnon  
lindhæbbende,    ne ge leafnesword  
guðfremmendra    gearwe ne wisson,  
maga gemedu.    Næfre ic maran geseah  
eorla ofer eorðan,    þonne is eower sum,  
secg on searwum;    nis ðæt seldguma,  
wæpnum geweorpad:    næfre him his wlite leoge  
ænlic ansyn.    (237-251a)

Rebsamen translates this passage as:

"Who might you be in your burnished mailcoats  
 shining with weapons? Who steered this warboat  
 deep-running keel across the waveswells  
 here against the shore? I assure you now  
 I've held this guard-post hard against sailors  
 watched over Denmark down through the years  
 that no hateful shipband might harbour unfought.  
 Never have boatmen beached more openly  
 shield-bearing thanes unsure of your welcome  
 hoisting no signal to hail peace-tokens  
 friendship to the Danes. I doubt that I've challenged  
 a loftier shieldman than your leader there  
 hale in his war-gear-- no hall-lounger that  
 worthied with weapons-- may his wit not belie  
 so handsome a swordman." (9)

This speech introduces several themes that will surface repeatedly in the remainder of the text. The shore-guardian particularly notes Beowulf's appearance; his exclamation literally rendered might be: "Never have I seen a warrior on earth more powerful than is one of your number, a man in his wargear!" (247b-248a). Beowulf's appearance makes a declaration about his identity. The thane of Hrothgar follows with this assessment, "*nis ðæt seldguma*," which Rebsamen renders "no hall-lounger that!" although the word *seldguma* could simply indicate "common retainer" or "hall-warrior." Rebsamen's reading that the term indicates "hall-lounger," as if a term of contempt or reproach, is supported by the half-line immediately following, in which the shore-guard calls Beowulf "worthied with weapons," to support his assessment that he is no "hall-lounging" imposter dressed-up as a battle-tried warrior, but rather a veteran who knows how to use the weapons he wears.

Already in his speech, then, the coast-guardian thane has introduced a theme related to the conclusions reached by close examination of the heroic boast. He will further elaborate on this theme in the following lines, but just from his observations of the

battle-gear of the Geats, and the carriage of Beowulf in his accoutrements, the shore-guardian has read a silent declaration. Much like the first portion of the heroic boast identified by Tyler, the battle-gear of a man apparently made statements about his past actions, and his reliability.

That this would be so in a warrior culture such as the Anglo-Saxon culture that informs this text should not be surprising. Modern armies to this day authorize the wearing of badges and tabs that indicate certain "declarations" about their wearers. A man does not have to serve long in the Infantry of the American Army to understand that within that community, individuals "read" signs, such as the Ranger Tab or the Master Parachutist Badge, almost intuitively or unconsciously when meeting another Infantryman in uniform. Beyond such officially-sanctioned signifiers, there are informal cultural indicators as well, such as the way in which the uniform is worn, the shape of headgear such as the beret in an Airborne Infantry battalion, the roll of the brim of a patrol cap, even the way in which the sleeves are rolled up or the pants tucked-in to the tops of the boots. There is no doubt that in an Infantry battalion, a soldier with only a few years' experience can immediately tell on sight whether a stranger in his full field gear (helmet, load-bearing suspenders and belt or LBE, canteens, ammunition pouches, bayonet, flashlight, weapon, and other specific items of equipment) is a "field soldier" used to training and spending time out in the woods, or a "pogue" ("hall-lounger").

In much the same way, in another modern culture that can help us to understand the sorts of "declarations" the shore-guardian was hearing on Beowulf's approach, the tack and equipment chosen by cowboys broadcasts unmistakable signals to knowledgeable observers. In much the same way as that in which the shore-guardian

assessed the gear and bearing of Beowulf and his war-group, ranchers and cowboys assess the signs that declare whether an individual is genuine or fake. Examples of this type of assessment abound in popular country music and in movies. Horseman and trainer Pat Parelli, who has spent his life with horses and in the international horse culture, is keenly aware of the types of declarations that can be broadcast without a single spoken word, through signs such as equipment, bearing, and actions. In Natural Horse-Man-Ship, Parelli writes, "You should be able to recognize a Natural Horse-Man by the tools he uses and also by the tools he wouldn't use" (140).

The shore-guardian, having read a certain declaration in Beowulf's appearance in his war-gear, has implied that there are those (such as the "hall-lounger") who may appear to an untrained observer to be trustworthy warriors, but who are not, and then there are warriors worthied with weapons. He continues this theme by saying, "*næfne him his wlite leoge ænlic ansyn*" (250b-251a). Literally, he is saying, "may not his countenance belie his peerless [literally 'one-like' or 'unique, unlike any other'] appearance." In other words, "May your non-verbal promise not be a lie!"

This pregnant speech should remind the reader of the sort of issues surrounding the boast and the implications of at least the first two elements of the heroic *beot*. Beowulf has not actually issued a public boast, but his appearance as he moves from the beach to the cliffs has already accomplished much of the same things that the boast accomplishes. He has made a declaration. He has given a public indication of his reputation and prowess, in this case a favorable one. And he has opened the door to an implicit issue in formal boasting as well: "may these words not be found to belie their



actual import." His declaration places his reputation on the line in much the same way that his formal boasts will do later in the narrative.

The resonance with the themes surrounding boasting become even more apparent when the coast-guardian continues speaking, after listening to Beowulf state his mission and desire to meet with Hrothgar. Hrothgar's cliff-ward replies:

"Æghwæðres sceal  
 scearp scyldwiga    gescad witan  
 worda ond worca    se ðe wel ðenceþ.  
 Ic ðæt gehyre:    ðæt ðis is hold weorod  
 frean Scyldinga." (287b-291a)

Because this passage has clear ties to the *oðer twegen* concept that Tyler discovered in Old English and Old High German heroic boasting, a closely literal translation is helpful:

"A sharp shield-warrior  
 must know the difference    of either:  
 words or works,    the one that thinks well.  
 This I hear:    that this war-group is loyal  
 to the lord of the Scyldings."

The guardian raises the theme, ubiquitous in the text, of *worda ond worca*. He declares that "one must be sharp to slice between words and works." The imagery, that of splitting or "shedding" (*gescad*) seems to have the same conceptual impact as "discriminate" (to divide into groups, make "increments" out of). His decision is important: if he reads the signs incorrectly there could be grave consequences. He announces his determination by saying, "*Ic ðæt gehyre*," implying the following expanded statement: "I have listened to the words that you have said, and I have weighed not just their apparent message, but their underlying message, and this is what I hear."

This phrasing, and particularly the concept of "dividing between two," is critically important to the themes of the text. The hero, when issuing a heroic boast, uses the *oðer*

*twegen* motif to imply, "There are only two allowable outcomes. The unspoken third alternative, that my words will not result in anybody's death at all, will not be considered, will not be permitted. My words will be tied in reality to action, even if I have to die." Now, from a different angle, the coast-guardian has raised the same issue. He in a sense is saying, "There are words that are honest, and there are words that are not. I have looked underneath your surface words, to see the meanings to which they are anchored. I believe that they are anchored to honest meanings." Notice how this concept is exactly parallel to the speech examined just prior to this one, in which the shore-guardian looked at Beowulf's exterior "speech" and said explicitly, "May that outward appearance, that surface sign, be tied to an honest signification. May your facial appearance not be anchored to a treacherous underlying meaning."

All the important themes present in this exchange suggest that situations such as the encounter with the shore guardian differ only in degree from events like the heroic boast. The type of man who stands up in public and declares that he is laying his entire identity on the line to guarantee his participation in mortal combat, and restricting himself to only two choices, success or personal dissolution and the end of his self (at least the end of his identity in the mortal world), does not spring into being from nowhere. The hero who, in an extreme situation enters into a word-deed bond such as the heroic boast actually makes the same kind of (usually tacit or implicit) declarations every day. As seen from the concepts articulated by the cliff-guardian, a man's identity was very much invested in declarations as commonplace as his physical appearance.

The negative examples in the text reinforce this same theme. Unferth is a complex character who is described as the *ðyle*, or "spokesman, orator" (Klaeber 149). He enjoys

prominence in Heorot, but Beowulf minces no words when he defends himself against Unferth's charge that, at least as a youth, Beowulf's exploits did not live up to his reputation. Beowulf declares that he has "heard of no such sea-battles" from Unferth's reputation as the one which Beowulf undertook as a youth, although Unferth has achieved some notoriety, Beowulf declares, for slaying his own brothers (581-588). Beowulf then avers that Hrothgar would not have to endure such humiliation at the hand of Grendel, such "*hynðo on Heorote, gif þin hige wære, / sefa swa searogrim swa þu self talast . . .*" (would not have had to endure "humiliation in Heorote, if your heart were / as battle-grim as you yourself tell it . . .") (593-594). Beowulf accuses Unferth of not matching deeds with action.

Even more clearly, we see that some men have achieved anecdotal status as negative examples of failing to live up to their promise. The sanction of being immortalized in song and story, as Heremod had evidently been by the time Hrothgar brings up his name, must have been a powerful negative stimulus at work in the Anglo-Saxon warrior society. In fact, his story appears twice, as if to emphasize the contrast with Beowulf (900-915, 1709-1724a). Heremod does not grow up to realize the promise he shows in youth, lets down his father's lineage, holds back treasure and joy from his supporters, brings grief to his people.

Thus, we can posit the Anglo-Saxon combat decision in the days prior to the greatly-magnified position of king or lord as dependent upon a kind of "personal weight." A "light" individual might be known for tossing around casual words, words that he does not really mean and which he does not intend to be taken seriously, such as Unferth, whose very title implies that he is situated on the side of words as opposed to action. Of

him, Beowulf only need say, "If your actions matched your words . . ." On the other hand, the text implies, the exemplary retainer (and later the exemplary king) is the one who has a gravity between his declarations and their actions. He has a tight connection between the "signs" that he displays (his words, his non-verbal declarations), and their underlying meaning. In fact, as seen in the "acceptance" speech of the shore-guardian, the adjective *hold*, related to the modern English word, was used to mean "loyal" or "true" (291b). Those who, as Beowulf accused Unferth of doing, allowed their words to drift away from an anchoring in action, can almost be seen as having a "weak hold," of being unstable signs in which a traveler would not place much trust.

Although it is unusual to apply the modern terminology of "sign" and "signifier" to medieval texts in a way suggesting conscious familiarity with such concepts by the culture, the copious evidence of the text as the theme resurfaces over and over in different guises points to at least great sensitivity to such ideas. Ferdinand de Saussure and his linguistic analysis in the late nineteenth century gave the terms and basic outlines that literary critics in the twentieth century and thereafter would use to understand and explain such themes, but the concepts themselves clearly arise in various forms in centuries and cultures previous to that time.

In sum, the pervasiveness of the theme of *hold*, or a kind of tight connection between declaration and action, as well as the important place of the boast in Beowulf and other pre-Alfredian poetry, suggests that this concept had an important motivating factor in situations dealing with mortal combat. As S. L. A. Marshall asserted in 1947, "personal honor is the one thing valued more than life itself by the majority of men" (149). Based upon the textual evidence available, that concept of personal honor,

although almost immeasurably different in 747 or 847, appears to have been the principal motivating factor behind the combat decision. It appears, moreover, to be conceived in terms of the weight or honesty of a man's declarations--the strength of their connection to "truth" or "reality," in the form of deeds.

## CHAPTER V

### THE COMBAT DECISION

#### IN THE NEW HEROIC CODE

The distinction between the older embodiment of the heroic code and the newer model is primarily a distinction of suicidal loyalty. In terms of the combat decision, we might say that the texts produced concurrent to and after the reign of Alfred appear to consciously insert a motivating factor in the combat decision as follows: "In addition to the previous factors influencing the decision to enter into avoidable mortal combat, add another. If your lord dies in combat, you will now be honor-bound to accept mortal combat, in fact seek mortal combat, at that very moment and at the scene of his death, even if it ends in your death. You will not, as before, have the option of avoiding mortal combat and coming back to take revenge later." Note that this subtle distinction, as I understand it, does not abolish the reasons that might have contributed to a positive combat decision in the earlier manifestation of the code. Rather, it adds another motivating factor. The effect of this change, as Hill has described it, is to shift the weight of the combat decision from a retainer-centered dynamic, typified in boasting, to a king-centered or lord-centered one (Hill 129).

The motivation for such a change is important. Hill attributes the first textual evidence for this to the "Cynewulf and Cyneheard" entry in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (75), a work which was begun sometime around 886, during the reign of King Alfred (King of Wessex, 871-899) (Mitchell and Robinson 132). The motive Hill gives for this shift, fostered by the literary works commissioned by the king, including the Chronicle, is solidarity. In the retainer-centered ideal found in Beowulf, there is a sort of "free-

agency" of retainers, as already noted. Hill points out that Hygelac, in fact, seems a little uneasy at Beowulf's readiness to align himself with Hrothgar, and wonders if his nephew has taken up a new lord, until Beowulf awards him with the spoils of his victorious sojourn in Denmark (Hill 3, 50-51).

If the poem's Hygelac was uneasy about the idea of Beowulf's defection, real kings such as Alfred must have perceived such free-agency as a serious liability, especially as England was subjected to the intense pressure of successful Viking raid after Viking raid, and the possibility of dissolution. Hill suggests that Alfred initiated a conscious campaign of elimination against the idea of painlessly switching lords. He postulates "an effort to legislate the force of ethical ties, perhaps as part of the Alfredian program of reform, a program including the distribution of the Pastoral Care and the making of the West Saxon annals" (76). After all, considering again my notion of the combat decision, the choice between entering mortal combat or avoiding it needs serious motivational factors prior to a positive decision to enter avoidable combat. If there are relatively few sanctions against switching lords, the many kingdoms on the English island were in jeopardy of being rapidly swallowed up or dissolved as men decided that loyalty to one lord was not worth the loss of land, family, and life itself. And in fact, during the ninth century, kingdoms were dissolving rapidly under internal and external pressures.

Viewed in this light, it is easy to see that "Cynewulf and Cyneheard" is less a story about a historical action that took place in AD 755 (actually 757 through 786 [Cassidy and Ringler 139-142]) and more about "the point that King Alfred and his scribes might find compelling, and the one controlling developments in the narrative

[...]: to kill a king who is not clearly unjust or treacherous is bad business" (Hill 75).

Hill notes that historians have found in the law code of Alfred sanctions such as the death penalty for plotting against the king, harboring exiles or traitors, or even for fighting or drawing a weapon in the king's hall (76). Such regulations, familiar enough to the post-Hastings English kingdoms of the later Middle Ages, are a change from the kind of revenge-code environment of the Beowulf text and represent the new direction in which Alfred was moving the concept of kingship.

This historical evidence is bolstered by the literary evidence in "Cynewulf and Cyneheard" itself, literary evidence which demonstrates that it is better to die fighting for your lord than to take any reward (even a reward of your own naming) for switching loyalty to an enemy of your king (even after your king has died), with one extremely important stipulation: the lord deserving of such loyalty must have *riht* (Hill 74).

The AD 755 entry, written some hundred years or so after the AD 786 events that it narrates, is enlarged into a fascinating narrative, complete with shifts to direct dialogue between participants. For the purposes of our examination of the move away from a free-agency model of retainership, the well-known crisis points in the narrative will suffice. The king's bodyguard, having allowed the death of their lord Cynewulf at the hands of Cyneheard and his raiding party, are offered *feoh ond feorh* ("money and life") by the superior force of Cyneheard's men (Cassidy and Ringler 140, line 16). Cyneheard was also, like Cynewulf, descended from Cerdic and thus an *æpeling* ("noble" or "prince") with some apparently legitimate hope for sitting on Cynewulf's throne after killing the king. But the doomed retainers will have none of it: *ond hiera nænig hit geðicgean nolde: ac hie simle feohtende wæran oð hie alle lægon buton anum Bryttiscum gisle ond*



*se swiðe gewundad wæs* (140, lines 16-18). My literal translation: "And nothing would they accept for themselves: but they were fighting continuously until they all lay [dead] but for one British hostage, and he very wounded was."

The next morning, Cynewulf's eoldormen Osric and Wiferth arrive on the scene with (apparently) overwhelming forces, causing the would-be usurper to barricade himself with his band inside the compound that has been the scene of the regicide. Noting that *hiera mægas him mid wæron* (some of Osric and Wiferth's kin were with him), Cyneheard offers that Osric and Wiferth name their own reward in *feos ond londes* ("fees and lands") if they will unite the two groups that are already related by kinship (and recognize Cyneheard's claim to either the entire *rice* or, as Hill sees it, at least some of the realm) (Cassidy and Ringler 141, lines 23-25; Hill 84). Exemplifying loyalty to the fallen king over this potential offer for personal advancement and also over any enticements based on kinship, Osric and Wiferth lead their men in an attack on Cyneheard's forces, overrunning the compound and killing everyone but Osric's godson, though he *wæs oft gewunded* ("was often wounded" or "bore many wounds") (142, lines 30-32).

Significantly, in the "memory" of the historian in the reign of Alfred, reconstructing the events of the eighth century, none of the retainers on either side attempts to slip away in the confusion to seek later revenge. That option is not even presented as a possibility, although the motive of effective later revenge is the model in Beowulf.

Hill sees the "Cynewulf and Cyneheard" entry as modeling "more or less the behavior advised in section 29 of Alfred's translation of Gregory's Pastoral Care: 'All

those who are under the yoke of lordship shall hold his lord, each one of them, in reciprocal honor, dignity, and worth' (*he sceal his hlaforð æghwælcre are & weorðscipes wierðne onmunan*, line 23)" (87). In other words, Alfred and the writing members of his kingdom deliberately fostered the movement of the position of king in a new direction, in which the position of king is in the ascendancy. It has not reached a state of absolutism, but Hill states that, "In these narratives of West Saxon feud a new ideal has been rightly established, one that politically asserts an ethically supreme kingship" (92).

In "The Ideal of Men Dying with their Lord in the Germania and The Battle of Maldon" (1976), Rosemary Woolf points out the difference between the events described without approbation in Beowulf and the events of "Cynewulf and Cyneheard," noting particularly the "difference of behaviour in the followers of Hnæf [who wintered with Finn, an enemy of their lord, for a temporary period in one of the tales embedded in the narrative of Beowulf] and the followers of Cynewulf" (71). She correctly asserts that Alfred or any king would suffer from such a mindset among his retainers, and that the cultural conditions that operate in the AD 755 entry are thus very different from those of Beowulf (71).

She also divides the code operating in the Chronicle entry from the suicidal loyalty demonstrated by Bryhtnoth's thanes in Maldon, written another hundred years or so later. She observes:

Any king would wish to have followers such as Cynewulf had: without such loyalty a king would be extremely vulnerable to assassination by a contender to the throne. But no king would wish his ealdormen to have followers such as Bryhtnoth had, for, if whenever an ealdorman was killed all his best and bravest

men were also morally compelled to die, the king's army would be intolerably weakened. (71)

Repudiating the "ethnic romanticism" that sees the ideals described by Tacitus operating over nine centuries (what I have called the "monolithic" model of the "heroic code") (63), she shows that neither last stand in "Cynewulf and Cyneheard" is portrayed as a loving desire to lie down in death with one's lord (71). In fact, she questions the historicity of Tacitus's attribution of suicidal loyalty, suggesting that he may have simply borrowed descriptions from Caesar or Sallust to begin with (64-65). Thus, like Hill, Woolf notes the political motivations for a text such as "Cynewulf and Cyneheard," which she directly associates with Alfred's desire to foster political and military effectiveness (71).

The origins of the code of loyalty demonstrated in Maldon, however, prove to be more troublesome to Woolf. She imagines the almost unbelievable possibility that the Maldon-poet traveled to Fulda, where there were monasteries with positive evidence of study of Tacitus, and "skillfully sought to naturalize an alien and unfamiliar ideal by blending it with a familiar one" (76-77). She settles upon what she believes is a more satisfactory conclusion:

If [. . .] Maldon expresses a heroic ideal unknown to Beowulf and that in extant narrative it shares this ideal exclusively with the Bjarkamál, there will be a strong case for accepting Bertha Phillpotts's suggestion that the Bjarkamál became known in England in the tenth century through Danish settlers and that the author of Maldon drew upon it: indeed that he was deeply impressed by it and borrowed from it the major theme and mood of his poem. (79)

Woolf finds further support for her theory in the fact that only in Maldon and the Bjarkamál is there a specific image of the lord and retainer lying together in death (80). She asserts that, "The supposition that the author of Maldon learnt of this motif from the Bjarkamál provides not only a satisfactory literary explanation of the resemblance but also a satisfactory historical one, for it was in the long unconverted Scandinavian countries that highly primitive traditions survived into the Christian literary era" (80).

Notwithstanding the quibble that "highly primitive" or pagan traditions indeed survived into the Christian literary era in England, even into the twentieth century (and arguably into America as well), there are other reasons which compel us to consider other possible explanations for the resonance between Tacitus and Maldon. To begin with, there is no reason that the Maldon poet needed either Tacitus or the Bjarkamál as a source. Elements of the old model heroic code clearly involve retainers pledging victory or their own self-destruction in certain instances; the new element is the suicidal loyalty to the lord demonstrated in Maldon. Hill's chapter on Maldon, "Triumphant Lordship and New Retainership," makes the case convincingly that the behavior in Maldon marks the culmination of the process begun by Alfred. It is thus a modification of a model loosely descended from the Germanic tribes described by Tacitus so many centuries earlier, and coincidental similarities, albeit based on entirely different cultural and political conditions, should not be overly surprising.

Finally, regarding Woolf's claims that such suicidal loyalty is an alien, pagan remnant that must have been imported into the Christianized England of the late tenth century, Hill has found compelling similarities to the imagery in the Dream of the Rood. He writes:

In doing as Byrhtwold does, one takes one's lord's fate lovingly as one's own, much as does the retainer cross in the Dream of the Rood [ . . . ]. The retainer cross learns to become a very different kind of retainer. Becoming one with the way of Christ, it gains compensation for pain, loss, and revilement [ . . . ]. This new way of the warrior Christ requires an inversion of socially ordinary, militarily defensive, or survival-oriented responses [ . . . ]. In Maldon, the same kind of inversion and redirection occurs, if not the same final reward. (124-5)

The loyalty code exemplified in Maldon certainly is a new kind of code, but it shares many of the mechanisms of the old code, even mechanisms of motivation found in Beowulf. Not only are these motivating factors not alien to English literature existing on English soil at the time of Maldon's composition, they are so characteristic as to be distinctive. The old code was constructed around free agency, and the ascendancy of the bond to the king found in Maldon to the obliteration of the agency of the retainer would have been strange to Beowulf. But he would have recognized the mechanisms in place to support the kind of combat decision enacted by Bryhtnoth's retainers in the fragmentary text of Maldon.

The principal motivating factor demonstrated in the poem that impels the suicidal retainers to die fighting beside their dead lord even in the face of insurmountable odds is very familiar: the theme of words and deeds, or the declaration theme so familiar to the world of Beowulf. One of the first to articulate this motivation is the loyal retainer

Ælfwine:

Ælfwine ða cwæð, he on ellen spræc:  
 "Gemunað ðara mæla ðe we oft æt meodo spræcon,  
 ðonne we on bence beote ahofon,  
 hæleð on healle, ymbe heard gewinn.

Nu mæg cunnian hwa cene sy!"

(Cassidy and Ringler 368, lines 211-215)

Ælfwine then quoth, he in strength spoke:

"Remember those times that we often, at our mead, spoke.

Then we on the benches heaved-up *beot* (heroic boasts),

we heroes in the hall, [boasts] about hard battle.

Now it may find out how keen that was!"

The principal factor to which Ælfwine refers are his boast-words and those of his companions. He voices the concern, in language almost identical to the *worda ond worca* speech of the coast-guardian of Beowulf, that deeds match words. "Now we shall see," he exclaims, "how keen that!" It is almost as if, like the shore-guardians announcement that a "sharp shield-warrior must be able to divide between words and deeds," Ælfwine is saying, "Now we shall see if this situation is sharp enough to sever our deeds from their corresponding boast-words!" As if such a concept is hazardous to his very identity, Ælfwine immediately, in the very next lines, announces who he is before wading off through the battle to kill a Viking:

"Ic wylle mine æðelo eallum gecyðan,  
ðæt ic wæs on Myrcon miccles cynnes;  
wæs min ealda fæder Ealhelm haten,  
wis ealdorman, woruldgesælig." (lines 216-219)

"I will make known my noble-birth to all,  
that I was of mighty Myrcian kin;  
my old-father was called Ealhelm,  
a wise aldorman, worldly blessed."

In spite of the very real change that has occurred between Beowulf and Maldon, the personal factors of motivation are almost identical. There is the same theme of connection between "sign" and "signified" present (word and work), and the realization by a certain type of individual that the dissolution, (or severance, to use the metaphor

favored by both Ælfwine and the shore-guardian), of such a connection is inimical to reputation, personal identity, family, indeed existence itself. Related to the same concept, the poem resonates with the word-choice of the shore-guardian at another point, in line 24, in which Bryhtnoth selects his position on the front line: *ðær he his heorðwerod holdost wiste*. The denotation of the sentence is that he chose his position "where he knew his hearth-troops were the most *hold* (loyal, faithful)," but we have already seen in the speech of the shore-guardian that the word *hold* is apt to show up just where the questions of the bonding between sign and signified, word and work, are also up for examination.

That this theme from Beowulf also informs the combat decision of Bryhtnoth's retainers (although in a combat situation that would be strange to Beowulf himself) is apparent from other parts of the Maldon text in which Offa raises the issue. First, Offa's dire prediction from some time before the battle is recalled immediately following the duplicitous flight of the doublets Godwine and Godwig:

Swa him Offa on dæg ær asæde,  
 on ðam meðelstede, ða he gemot hæfde,  
 ðæt ðær modelice manega spræcon  
 ðe eft æt ðearfe ðolian noldon. (198-201)

So to him Offa one day ere had said,  
 in that meeting place, when he a meeting had,  
 that there great-heart-like many spoke  
 that after, at time-of-need would not thole (endure).

In other words, the poet introduces the words-works theme, this time calling attention to a words-works disconnect, at the moment he wants to condemn Bryhtnoth's retainers who are fleeing the battlefield. Offa declared during the council of war that some of

Bryhtnoth's retainers spoke words that were mightier than their own personal ability to endure.

If such examples are not enough to convince the reader that the Maldon poet was working with themes very much native to Old English heroic poetry, Offa's death provides yet another example of the theme of the declaration and its fulfillment:

Pa æt guðe sloh  
 Offa ðone sælidan    ðæt he on eorðan feoll,  
 and ðær Gaddes mæg    grund gesohte.  
 Raðe wearð æt hilde    Offa forheawen;  
 he hæfde ðeah geforðod    ðæt he his frean gehet,  
 swa he beotode ær    wið his beahgifan  
 ðæt hi sceoldon begen    on burh ridan,  
 hale to hame,    oððe on here crincgan,  
 on wælstowe    wundum sweltan:  
 he læg ðegenlice    ðeodne gehende. (285b-294)

This well-known passage deserves attention. My literal rendition of the passage, staying as close to the original language as possible in order to preserve important nuances in the text, is:

Then, at battle, Offa,  
 slew that seafarer    so that he on fell upon the earth,  
 and there the kinsman of Gadd [Offa]    sought the ground.  
 Rightaway Offa    was hewn to pieces;  
 yet he had accomplished    what he had promised to his lord,  
 just as he had ere boasted    [face-to-face] with his ring-giver,  
 that he must do both [either]:    ride again into the burgh,  
 his home, hale and whole,    or else in battle fall  
 in the slaughterplace,    die of wounds:  
 he lay down, thanelike,    beside his lord [near at hand]

By now we should immediately perceive again the familiar theme that seems to be so crucial to the motivation of the warrior in surviving Old English literature. Offa has made a declaration to his lord. In this case, the declaration is explicit: we are told that he boasted earlier *wið*, meaning "toward" or "against" or "face-to-face with" his ring-



giver. He has publicly attached all that he is, his reputation and his existence, to his future performance in battle. He has said that he will do one of two things: no other options are available. He will ride back victorious, or he will cringe in death of wounds. In this poetic epitaph, we see that, though he died, Offa accomplished one of the two things. He did not make his boast into a lie by running for the woods with Godric. Far from having his identity dissolved, this action strengthens Offa's identity. He is identified by personal name twice, and also by patronymic, a fact that might go unnoticed were we not aware of the presence of this sort of pattern in the accounts remaining of formal boasts.

Finally, we might note that for both Offa and Ælfwine, the motivating factor of their words is mentioned in the thick of the action, just as Beowulf during his battles is depicted as thinking either back to words he has said, or forward to words that will be said about him. Maldon depicts Ælfwine hearkening back during the battle to his spoken boast-words, and Offa after the battle is seen to have fulfilled his boast. Earlier, in lines 246-253a, Offa thinks forward to his reputation, particularly the scorn he will endure for failing to fulfill his boast, and is then seen *ful yrre wod, feaht fæstlice* (253b-4). Their reputation, apparently, was indeed secured, as a minimum secured in the words of the poem. Indeed, it has endured to this day.

## CHAPTER VI

## CONCLUSION

This subject appears to be loaded with perhaps more implications than have heretofore been granted, hidden as they have been under an umbrella theory of the undifferentiated "Anglo-Saxon warrior code" which, once removed, uncovers a small patch of new ground for excavation. This small patch of ground may indeed be very deep. Initial observations indicate that there are veins of worthwhile substance for mining in at least the following three areas: literary, political, and theological.

In terms of our literary understanding of the body of Old English heroic literature, the question of motivation for warriors facing the combat decision and possibly violent death -- a violent death that can, for a price, be avoided -- opens up a rich vein of study in tension in the texts. There is tension in every single combat decision, between the forces pushing the individual toward, and the forces pulling the individual away from, his possible violent death at the hands of edged weapons (or gruesome supernatural beasts, as the case may be). Furthermore, the close inspection of cultural factors such as the boast allows us to see themes latent in unexpected locations of the text, to which we became attuned by seeing the same themes in more obvious form in their dramatic or trans-textual manifestations. Finally, our attention to linguistic and thematic similarities between texts such as Beowulf and Maldon, texts in which we might expect to find only differences, based upon our new understanding of the nuances present in the formerly monolithic concept of the code, shows us an important lesson in the uses and limits of literature. Although the political circumstances change dramatically between the productions of the different texts, the ways in which the producers of texts, even in different "warrior code"

eras, seek to motivate the audience, or demonstrate motivation in the characters, remain remarkably similar. It may appear that the warrior of 991 is motivated by desire to die beside the king, but a close literary analysis of the motivations of Offa and Ælfwine show that, at the individual level, the actual mechanics of motivation may not have changed much at all, other than the end toward which the motivating factors move the characters.

Politically, the implications regarding the ability to persuade individuals to military action at the obvious risk of their own life, or even more difficult, at the prospect of the inevitable loss of their own life, are tied up in the questions and themes we are observing in Old English heroic literature. Did the soldier in the Second World War fighting for the U.S. Army have a different set of motivating factors impelling him into combat from, say, the soldier fighting for the Wehrmacht? The answer is, of course, just as the individual in Beowulf has a real difference in motivation from the individual in a completely different time and place, such as Offa in Maldon. On the other hand, as hinted at earlier, it seems that the motivation of the individual may be surprisingly different than what the powers-that-be want us to believe are the motivations impelling their subjects to fight. Alfred and his literary "machine" apparently changed aspects of the king-retainer relationship, or at least the texts remaining from his period and after have changed the picture of that relationship that has come down to us. But the actual motivation for fighting does not always match what the literature declares. To use a modern analogy that may help clarify the point, the soldier in the German Army of World War II may have fought for reasons other than the reasons that the leaders and literature of that nation wanted everyone to believe were his motivation. Probably, he stayed and fought rather than running away for some definition of "personal honor," just as Marshall

asserted that the American soldier fought. That definition, clearly, is culturally dependent, but in some sense is determined by a fear of what others will say, just as Offa expressed in Maldon.

Theologically, or (to use words less controversial but with somewhat different shades of meaning) existentially or epistemologically, the issues that appear from a close reading of the slightly-unexpected motivations apparent in these Old English texts are both ripe for exploration and at the cutting edge of literary criticism at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The question of identity looms large in the motivation of the heroes portrayed in these texts. Indeed, there seems to exist a conscious or nearly-conscious understanding that, if words are split from some absolute referent, such as corresponding violent action in the case of a declaration of war, for example, then the identity of the individual will dissolve as well. That this issue is a theological one is evident from the way in which the oath of loyalty to the human lord is related to the oath of loyalty to the Christian Lord, explicitly in Beowulf and implicitly, if we accept Hill's assertion that the Dream of the Rood resonates with a similar concept of sacrificial loyalty described in Bryhtnoth's retainers, in Maldon.

In passages that are beyond the scope of this work, but which seem related to this theme, Beowulf depicts those who break their oaths or societal obligations as fuel for hell's fire (lines 175-186). And, this concern is a real one, for if an individual taking an oath of allegiance to a lord sees it as simply words, with no link to an underlying obligation, then the oath itself is empty. Those who have a tendency toward seeing all words as redefinable at the individual's discretion, or without objective reference, are moving in the direction of making the concept of oaths of allegiance meaningless.

The concept of honesty or loyalty, embodied in the word *hold* and related to the tie between word and work, as a motivation for the combat decision in these texts is striking. The hero is able to stand up and make the strongest possible connections between his words and his actions in a situation like the public heroic boast. The ability to do this seems in part related to the fact that the pervasiveness of the "declaration and fulfillment" theme made nearly every aspect of his life an arena for the practice of this same gravity. It is as if the hero defined himself as one whose words had weight, and scorned those who let their unconsidered words float around untethered to a corresponding objective meaning, as Beowulf scorns Unferth. If the act of stepping off a boat and moving up the beach is a declaration, fraught with potential consequences and implications for the hero's identity, then such individuals must have developed a sense of guarded gravity at all times. Further, it seems he was willing to face death at certain moments because he understood that a failure to connect word and work leads to a dissolution more complete than death (which, after all, has not dissolved Beowulf's identity: the *mærða* he sought continues to live on).

In a society that challenges or denies any inherent connection between sign and signification questions of identity or existence abound. Julia Kristeva in Tales of Love has posited that the formation of the self or the subject comes from a process of escaping an original condition of narcissism (24). In the myth of Narcissus, she notes, the doomed young man could not distinguish between sign and signified (116). His reflection appears to be an object of desire: his discovery that it is a sign empty of objectivity creates his crisis. Significantly, the fate of Narcissus is his own death or dissolution, the same fate that the heroic boosters seem to have realized as threatening those who disregard *hold*,

disregard the connection between symbol (in their case, spoken word), and signification (in their case, the promised mortal combat). If, as was declared in 1947, an individual will really only risk his life because of some sense of personal honor, what happens when the very existence of personhood is threatened by the slipperiness or *un-hold* of every word that might have formerly defined the person or the self? If the individual himself is composed of a collection of signs (primarily, the words that make up his thoughts and consciousness, but also the symbols that he appropriates as self-representation, such as his clothing, haircut, beard, lack of beard, automobile, favorite expressions, favorite songs, and on and on through the endless cultural signifiers that linguistic critics began to scrutinize in the twentieth century), what happens if the signs that compose the individual are seen to be without any signification? There must be a corresponding dissolution of the concept of self altogether.

The meaningful questions that can be generated from even a shallow probing of a few words from texts thousands of years old gives hope that, even with the critical atmosphere declaring that words have lost all meaning, there are lessons still waiting to be unlocked from the word-hoard left to us by Beowulf and his friends.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The dating of the creation of the manuscript itself, based on primarily paleographical (analysis of handwriting and lettering techniques) arguments, is generally undisputed. Kiernan discusses the significant studies on this subject on page 15 and the following pages.

<sup>2</sup> There are approximately five foliations that have been proposed by scholars since the discovery of the manuscript. Kiernan himself uses a unique foliation, based upon his thorough analysis of the MS, its hair-and-flesh alternation, and upon his explanation of probable folio-expansion techniques, all of which is very convincing (Kiernan 71-99).

<sup>3</sup> Latin title "De Origine et Situ Germanorum." All English translations are from Rives Germania.

<sup>4</sup> In Reassessing Anglo-Saxon Culture, Eric John asserts that Bede's famous passage describing the arrival of the three Germanic peoples is an insertion into the manuscript (5). John notes that his proposed interpolator is "suspiciously precise about personal and geographical names; Bede himself has the imprecision of honest ignorance" (5). John also notes that the prominent brothers Hengest and Horsa, hired by Vortigern to repel the Picts in Bede's account (or the Bede-interpolator's account), have names which mean "Horse" and "Mare," from which he suggests that they were probably legendary leaders of an unlikely and probably legendary coalition of three tribes on three boats (4-5). Whatever the exact date and circumstances surrounding the early arrival of Germanic

peoples to the British Isles, there is no dispute that the Anglo-Saxon culture of England was directly descended from that brought by Germanic immigrants, and retained a strong sense of cultural identity and many of the characteristics described by Tacitus centuries before in Northern Europe.

<sup>5</sup> I have taken all references to the original Latin of Tacitus from the edition of M. Winterbottom and R. M. Ogilvie. For the above-translated passage, the original Latin is: *insignis nobilitas aut magna patrum merita principis dignationem etiam adolescentulis adsignant; ceteris robustioribus ac iam pridem probatis adgregantur, nec rubor inter comites aspici* (44).

<sup>6</sup> The original reads: *reges ex nobilitate, duces ex virtute sumunt. nec regibus infinita ac libera potestas, et duces exemplo potius quam imperio, si prompti, si conspici, si ante aciem agant admiratione praesunt* (41).

<sup>7</sup> The original reads: *si civitas in qua orti sunt longa pace et otio torpeat, plerique nobilium adolescentium petunt ultro eas nationes quae tum bellum aliquod gerunt, quia et ingrata genti quies et facilius inter ancipitia clarescunt magnumque comitatum non nisi vi belloque tueare* (44).

<sup>8</sup> The original reads: *quodque praecipuum fortitudinis incitamentum est, non casus nec fortuita conglobatio turmam aut cuneum facit sed familiae et propinquitates, et in proximo pignora, unde feminarum ululatus audiri, unde vagitus infantium. hi cuique sanctissimi testes, hi maximi laudatores; ad matres, ad coniuges vulnera ferunt: nec illae numerare et exigere plagas pavent, cibosque et hortamina pugnantibus gestant* (41).



<sup>9</sup> The original reads: *exigunt enim principis sui liberalitate illum bellatorem equum, illam cruentam victricemque frameam: nam epulae et quamquam incompti largi tamen apparatus pro stipendio cedunt* (44-45).

<sup>10</sup> The original reads: *Cum ventum in aciem, turpe principi virtute vinci, turpe comitatui virtutem in principis non adaequare. iam vero infame in omnem vitam ac probrosum superstitem principi suo ex acie recessisse; illum defendere tueri, sua quoque fortia facta gloriae eius adsignare praecipuum sacramentum est: principes pro victoria pugnant, comites pro principe* (44-45).

<sup>11</sup> I will treat Rosemary Woolf's important examination of this very question in the examination of the combat decision under the "new-code," which covers the Battle of Maldon, in Chapter V.

<sup>12</sup> This Old English term *wedd*, which meant a long-term oath, is the origin of modern English "wedding," which helps us to understand the distinction between this sort of a compact or obligation, and the pledges to specific and short-term action that Tyler and Renoir term "heroic oath" and I categorize under the word "boast" or "heroic boast."

<sup>13</sup> This boast is seven lines long. Beowulf's boast before plunging into the mere in search of Grendel's dam is nineteen lines, before the dragon he utters two speeches, with twenty lines that can be declared his formal boast and which fits Tyler's three-element pattern, and his earlier boast-words in Heorot in lines 431-455, which also follow the pattern and contain his most graphic description of his death and devouring should he fail, is twenty-five lines long.

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